

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 331 839

TM 016 214

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TITLE Increasing Contact Between Home and the High School.
PUB DATE Feb 91
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Educational Research Association (14th, Boston, MA, February 13-16, 1991).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrators; *Community Involvement; *Counselors; Family Involvement; *Family School Relationship; High Schools; Parent Associations; Parent Participation; Questionnaires; *School Surveys; *Secondary School Teachers

ABSTRACT

School and family surveys were conducted to study home-school contact for families with high school students. Methods for a public high school to increase such contact are described. About 33% (108) of the teachers, counselors, and administrators at a public high school (with an enrollment of about 2,200 students) answered a questionnaire in February 1990 concerning their contact with students' families that year. Eighteen of the respondents were advisors to first-year students. Respondents had talked with between 0 and 125 families, with a median of 10. Slightly over half of the contact was conducted by phone, and about half was initiated by the school staff member. Teachers were more likely than counselors to think that the outcome of the contact was positive. About 6% (135) of family members of students completed a questionnaire in October 1990 concerning home school contact. Respondents, though not extensively involved, appeared more involved with the school than non-responding families. Efforts to involve more parents included improving communications, using the languages spoken in the community. Community outreach and parent information nights promoted involvement. A Parent Advisory Council was formed, and small support groups for parents were developed. The school was restructured into "houses" to form smaller communities, and parent liaison staff was designated. A summary of survey results is included. (SLD)

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Increasing Contact between Home and the High School

by Jean Chandler

Cambridge Rindge and Latin School

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Eastern Educational Research Association,
Boston, February 14, 1991

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Much research has shown that contact between home and school fosters student achievement and satisfaction (Comer, 1980; Fehrman, 1987; Henderson, 1987; Herman and Yeh, 1983; Kagan, 1984; Snow et al., 1991). At the same time, such contact between families and teachers drops off when students reach high school age (National Educational Association, 1985.)

I am a parent liaison at the Cambridge Rindge and Latin School, the only public high school in a town of 100,000 people. We have a very diverse school of about 2200 students from 64 countries, speaking 48 different languages.

First I will report the results of surveys I conducted in my school with school staff and with families regarding home-school contact. Then I will describe some of the things we are doing in an attempt to increase such contact.

About one third of the teachers, counselors, and administrators answered a four-page questionnaire in February 1990 about their contact with families thus far that year. Of the 108 respondents, 70 were teachers, 18 more were teachers who also served as advisors to help first-year students get oriented to high school, 6 were counselors, 4 were administrators, and 3 listed themselves as "other."

The number of families that those respondents had talked to by that time in the year ranged from 0 to 125, with a median of 10, and the amount of time spent talking to families ranged from 0 to 300 hours, with an average of 13 hours per staff member. Slightly more than half the contact was by phone. About 48% of the contact was initiated by the school staff member responding to the questionnaire, 37% by the family, and the remaining 15% by referral from other people inside or outside the school.

Contacts with families were judged by teachers and other staff to have positive outcomes about 75% of the time. Homework was the most frequently discussed topic of conversation (37% said they discussed this topic often), and course selection and college were next (with 35% saying often). On the other hand, marital problems, abuse and substance abuse were frequent topics of conversation for only 1.5% of respondents.

There were differences between teachers and counselors in the number of students they had assigned to them, with counselors averaging 126 and teachers 90. There were also differences in the number of calls they had received after the first progress reports, with counselors averaging 18 calls (which would represent families of about 14% of their students) and teachers less than 1% of their students. Although teachers had given an average of more than 19 negative progress reports, they heard from only one family each, on average. On the other hand, on Parent-Teacher night in November, teachers saw an average of 12 families each (13% of their students' families) while counselors averaged less than 7 (5% of their families). Contact was seen by teachers as having a positive outcome for the family nearly 85%

of the time, whereas contact with families was seen by counselors as having a positive outcome only half the time. Thus, although progress reports are given by teachers, they seem to stimulate contact between parents and guidance counselors, perhaps to ask about changing classes. During the Parent-Teacher night in the fall, on the other hand, there is more contact between parents and teachers than between parents and counselors.

When the three groups of respondents--teachers, Teacher Advisors, and counselors--were examined separately, some interesting differences emerged. Teachers had spent a total of 5 hours, on the average, talking to families, Teacher Advisors 15 hours, and counselors 42.5 hours; Teacher Advisors had a higher percentage of their contact face-to-face (56%) while the other two groups averaged 41% face-to-face; and Teacher Advisors initiated almost 70% of the contact they had with families, while counselors initiated only 49% and teachers less than 46%.

The most controversial topic was how to use the two nights on which school staff were contractually obligated to be available at the school to meet with parents. We always have a Parent-Teacher night with individual conferences in November after the first report cards come out. Some years we have also had an open house near the beginning of the school year at which families walk through their student's schedule, meeting in a group with each teacher to hear about the teacher's goals and expectations, curriculum, grading standards, etc., for that class. Guidance counselors, administrators, and teacher advisors are also present to talk with parents. Other years we have had a second night of individual conferences later in the spring. Respondents were asked to choose 2 from these 3 possibilities: 1) individual conferences in November, 2) individual conferences in spring, and 3) open house in early fall. 3% of school staff responding to this questionnaire chose November, 58% chose April, and 45% chose September. However, there were statistically significant differences by group. 62.5% of Teacher Advisors favored having the second Parent-Teacher night in September, while only 42% of the teachers and 33% of the counselors did. Conversely, 100% of counselors, 61% of teachers, and 31% of Teacher Advisors favored having one in April. (The percentages for November were 100% of Teacher Advisors, 94% of teachers, and 68% of counselors.)

Teacher advisors are more interested in the introductory open house because they are responsible for orientation of first-year students, and the open house in September serves a similar purpose for parents. Counselors, on the other hand, would prefer individual conferences with families in the spring when they are involved in scheduling students in courses for the following year. Teachers were split in their opinion, but the majority preferred two nights of individual conferences, one in November and one in April, to the September open house.

The choice of meetings was also a controversial topic among parents. 78% of the families chose November for a Parent-Teacher

night, 57% wanted the second one to be an open house type near the opening of school and 59% chose another individual conference type in the spring. Thus a Parent-Teacher night with individual conferences in November is the overwhelming choice of both school staff and families. Families are almost evenly divided on their second choice but they lean in the direction of the counselors' and teachers' preference for a spring individual conference type rather than that of the teacher advisors for an early fall open house.

Only about 6% of families filled out a two-page questionnaire sent out to all families in October 1990. 135 family members, including 1 Portuguese-speaking and 4 Spanish-speaking parents, responded to the questionnaire. Less than 4% of parents responding to the questionnaire were linguistic minority groups, whereas these parents comprise 37% of the school's families. My efforts to administer this questionnaire to a random sample of 15 parents in each of the three dominant linguistic minority groups failed.

Only 6 families (4.4%) said they needed child care for evening meetings, and only 9 families (6.7%) said they needed transportation. 76% of families wanted to sign up for individual conferences in advance rather than standing in line at individual teachers' doors, waiting their turn. Demonstrations of student work was the most important additional feature of these parent-teacher nights with 48% of parents saying this was important, 35% mentioning workshops, 33% music, and 29% food.

28% of respondents said they had been to many Parent-Teacher nights at the high school, 53% to a few, and 16% to none. It is important to remember that parents filled this questionnaire out early in the year, and some were families of first-year students who hadn't yet had an opportunity to go to many such events.

48% of families said they would be interested in parent support groups to talk with other parents about issues of parenting teenagers, while only 36% said they had any questions or concerns about the school.

Less than 10% of families have typically come to annual information sessions for parents of entering students, but 61% of families responding to the survey said they had been to an information session about the high school. 60% had attended any concert, play, or sports event; 69% had ever had a meeting with a teacher, guidance counselor, or administrator; only 14% had ever attended a Parent Advisory Council meeting, and 38% a School Committee meeting. In terms of informational sources, 81% said they had read the Parent Handbook, 81% said they had read about school events in the newspaper, 51% that they had seen announcements of school events on cable television, 46% on the radio, and only 28% had ever called the Linkline to get recorded messages about school events on the telephone.

The conclusion I have to draw from the family questionnaires

is that the respondents were much more involved with the school than the average family, and even so, they were not terribly active.

It is not hard to find reasons why home-school contact is so low at the high school level. Students now have many teachers instead of one main one, as in elementary school; schools are often bigger and more complicated, parents of high school students are older than parents of elementary students, and teachers and administrators often deal directly with students. It is often unclear to everyone exactly what role parents of high school students should play.

These factors are in addition to ones that affect all family-school involvement, such as policies and communication patterns that are disincentives for parent involvement, lack of training by teachers, administrators, and parents, attitudes that see family-school involvement as a peripheral matter, lack of time and energy for this involvement.

Even when there is some successful contact, usually it is uneven and unrepresentative. The segments of the parent population which are underrepresented usually face additional economic, cultural, and linguistic barriers to involvement with the school.

So what can be done in the face of all these barriers? Now I'll describe some of the approaches we have taken. We have tried almost all of the solutions suggested by the Massachusetts State Department of Education. We are fortunate to have a central parent information center in our school system and part-time parent workers in every school. We also have citywide parent coordinators working in each of the three dominant linguistic minority groups--Portuguese, Haitian Creole, and Spanish--in the city, and parent groups being organized for each of these groups citywide, as well as a parent group for Title One families.

All important communications are translated into the four major languages spoken by families in the school. We have a parent handbook which gives important information, including dates and telephone numbers, and newsletters in those four languages as well as a video about the school. The video is shown at parent information nights as well as on cable television several times a year in each language. We have also had other television and radio programs about the school in different languages. We have guidance counselors, teachers, and administrators who can speak all of these and other languages.

We have a cable television station at the high school itself as well as a second one for the school system as a whole. We have a central linkline with messages about school events and an answering machine on in the high school parent liaison office 24 hours a day. We have regular articles about school events in local newspapers.

I have sought to work through churches, ethnic community organizations, and public housing tenant services to increase outreach to underrepresented groups and to hold meetings in places other than the school. This work has often been discouraging since community organizations usually have shaky funding and are already stretched too thin. But we have learned that Haitian and Portuguese parents prefer weekend rather than weekday nights for school events, and next year we hope to involve bilingual teachers more in the outreach efforts toward families in linguistic minority groups.

In addition to the annual information nights mentioned above, parents of present and prospective students are welcome to visit classes, talk to school staff, and tour the school. Generally at the two Parent-Teacher nights we serve a free spaghetti dinner, have musical entertainment by some students, offer child care and translation services, show videos of classroom interaction or student reports, and display student work of various kinds. Parents can sign up ahead of time for individual conferences with school personnel either during the dinner or by calling the parent liaison office earlier that day. The night before, some homeroom teachers call each home to invite families personally.

Families are also called by school personnel each time their student is not in school or has some other problem. In the middle of every marking period, teachers send out progress reports and family members are invited to call or come in for conversations with one or more of the school staff. School staff contractually devote one afternoon a month, in addition to the two evenings, to contacts with families. However, these contacts have generally come at the initiative of individual families. I would like to get teachers and other school staff to be more proactive in this regard and make calls or send notes regularly with positive as well as negative feedback about individual students.

The Cambridge Partnership was formed to support public education in the city and has representation from all segments of the community--universities, community groups, businesses, as well as the schools. The members of the Cambridge Partnership have agreed to release their employees for meetings with school staff.

The high school has reorganized itself into six smaller "houses", each with its own unique features, curriculum, core teaching staff. This was done to provide smaller communities in which more personal contact and monitoring of students could take place. As already mentioned, first-year students have teacher advisors to help with orientation to the school as well as a guidance counselor throughout the four years. The houses also have their own activities for families as well--pot-luck suppers, parent councils, etc.

The parent liaisons act as advocates for parents, either

individually or collectively. For example, we are working now on changing the standard procedure for scheduling students in classes to require that parents or guardians sign off on the student's choice. We are suggesting this in order to foster communication between students, parents, and guidance counselors about this important decision for each student. To do this, we are currently writing instructions for parents on how and when to be involved, and we have participated in an in-service workshop for guidance counselors on communication with parents.

The parent liaisons for the school are responsible for organizing the school-wide Parent Advisory Council which meets monthly for discussion of topics chosen by the parents. In addition, it has many subcommittees which work on various advocacy issues, including the budget. There are parent representatives on hiring committees and on the school-based management group as well as on the School Improvement Council. Members of the School Improvement Councils from each school in the system form the Superintendent's Parent Advisory Council. Active high school parents are awarded plaques and a seat in a special section at graduation.

There are usually no more than 20-30 parents active in the high school PAC, and for language reasons it has been difficult to engage in meaningful discussion during meetings with family members who don't speak English, even when translation services are available. Although it is small and unrepresentative of the whole parent body, the PAC has initiated many positive changes in the school and in the system as a whole. For example, the PAC was instrumental in getting a Russian language course and a one-semester keyboarding course, and now we are working to get the physical education requirements and the substitute teacher policy changed in the system. We are also working toward the adoption of a schoolwide homework policy and towards the initiation of some enrichment classes in foreign languages.

Through Cambridge School Volunteers, parents and other members of the community, such as college students or senior citizens, are invited into classrooms in various roles or serve as regular tutors to individual students. Every year we have a college fair, a financial aid information night, various career days, a health fair, plays, concerts, art exhibitions, a science fair, various multicultural events, etc, to which families are invited.

I have also offered small support groups for parents and seminars on parenting topics such as communication and conflict resolution with teens. Usually more parents say they are coming than actually show up, but we recently had 16 family members attending a two-evening workshop, and most of this group has continued to meet to discuss their problems and successes with their teenagers. A seminar for parents on homework help is planned for the future. There are also low-cost courses open to parents in English as a Second Language, word processing, etc.

In spite of all these worthwhile efforts to involve parents as recipients and providers of information, as learners, as supporters and teachers of their children, as advisors and decisionmakers, home-school contact is still not what it should be in order to foster a partnership which will support each student in high school. We intend to persist in searching for new ways to foster such partnership and to reach out to all members of our community.

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School Survey--Feb. 1990

Respondents: n=108 (33%)

Teachers n=70 Teacher-Advisors n=18 Counselors n=6

Administrators n=4 Other n=3

of families talked with by Feb.: range=0 to 125, median=10

Hrs. spent talking to families by Feb.: range=0 to 300, mean=13

Teachers=5 Teacher-Advisors=15 Guidance Counselors=42.5

Initiation of contact: 48% by respondent, 37% family, 15% referral

Outcome: Positive 75% (Teachers 85%, Counselors 50%)

Subjects discussed often: Homework 37%, Course Selection, College 35%

of students assigned to respondent: teachers 90, counselors 126

of calls after first progress reports: teachers 1 (1%), couns. 18 (14%)

of families seen on Nov. P-T night: teachers 12 (13%), couns. 7 (5%)

Contact face-to-face: 49% (Teachers 46%, teacher-advisors 70%,
counselors 49%)

Preference for P-T nights: Nov. confs. 93%, April confs. 58%,
Sept. open house 45%

Nov.: teachers 94% teacher-advisors 100% counselors 68%

April: 61% 31% 100%

Sept.: 42 62.5 33

Family Survey--Oct. 1990

Respondents n=135 (6%) Eng-sp=130, Span-sp=4, Port.sp=1

Need child care for evening meetings: 6 (4.4%)

Need transportation for evening meetings: 9 (6.7%)

Preferences on P-T nights: advanced sign-up 76%, demonstrations
of student work 48%, workshops 35%, music 33%, food 29%

Nov. confs. 78%, April confs. 59%, Sept. open house 57%

Have attended P-T nights: many 28%, a few 53%, none 16%

Interested in parent support groups: 48%

Have a question or concern about the school: 36%

Ever attended: information session 61%; concert, play, or sports
event 60%; meeting with teacher, counselor, or admin. 69%; PAC
meeting 14%; School Committee meeting 38%

Information sources: parents handbook 81%; local newspaper 81%;
cable television 51%; radio 46%; linkline for recorded messages 28%